

2nd Brigade Combat Team 28th Infantry Division

FROM THE FRONT LINE

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Iraqi Troops Start Rolling Out in Ramadi

By Todd Pitman, Associated Press



An Iraqi soldier, 2nd Lt. Ahmed, rides in the command position in a Humvee on patrol in Ramadi, Iraq, Friday, March 31, 2006. Iraqi army troops in this volatile city deployed on a recent patrol downtown took a crucial step forward, rolling out in their own armored Humvees for the first time. (AP Photo/Todd Pitman)

RAMADI, Iraq - The troops didn't go far, the mission didn't last long and the neighborhood wasn't the most dangerous in town. But when Iraqi army troops moved out on a recent patrol in central Ramadi, they took a crucial step forward, rolling out in their own armored Humvees for the first time. Until now, this unit has mostly patrolled their small, relatively quiet slice of downtown on foot, leaving the worst parts of the turbulent city center to better-equipped U.S. troops.

American commanders want Iraqi units to operate independently in the more dangerous downtown areas of Ramadi, about 75 miles west of Baghdad. But they lack equipment - especially proper transport. Though they have their own trucks, they rely heavily on U.S. forces to move around. In recent weeks, that's begun to change.

The Iraqi Defense Ministry has begun distributing armored Humvees to Iraqi units that look nearly identical to their tan-colored U.S. counterparts. The Iraqi vehicles are equipped with bulletproof glass and radios, painted outside with the Iraqi flag and chocolate chip camouflage markings. "This is a huge step," said Marine 2nd Lt. Ryan Hub, who accompanied Iraqi troops on a foot patrol Friday while the Humvees provided back-up.

Tracing a finger along a satellite map of central Ramadi, Hub circled a roughly one-square-mile area near the Marine base which the Iraqis patrol. He then pointed to other Marine-controlled zones he hoped Iraqis troops would soon patrol in Humvees. "It means we can extend their battle space," said the 25-year-old from Sumter, S.C.

On Tuesday, the Humvees proved useful as Iraqi forces evacuated a soldier shot in the leg, said Lt. Col. Steve Neary, who commands the Marine's 3rd Battalion, 8th Regiment. Previously, such tasks would have been carried out by the U.S. military. On Friday, an Iraqi 2nd lieutenant named Ahmed was in the first Humvee of a four-vehicle convoy leaving a U.S. Marine base. Marine commanders asked that his full name not be used for fear he could be targeted by insurgents.

Taking a drag off a cigarette a few blocks on, Ahmed was startled to see two of his own vehicles - they had taken a wrong turn - coming in the opposite direction. "Follow me!" he yelled into the radio. "Follow me!" Soon, all four Humvees were circling the block in unison, passing rusted-out cars, blown-out apartment blocks and children raising their fists in the air to show support. Unlike other joint missions, only the Iraqis were radioing their minute-by-minute progress back to base. Ahmed's role was to provide back-up support for the foot patrol, which swept the apartment complex with several Marines in tow. Ahmed said if need be, his Humvees could evacuate casualties, or open fire with heavy machine guns. Such support

has traditionally been the job of the U.S. military. Marines weren't taking chances Friday, though, and had a separate supporting patrol that halted traffic so the Iraqi convoy could move unhindered.

The Iraqis didn't go far. The base's barbed-wire-topped wall was often visible as the Humvees repeatedly circled past it. Following the Marines' advice, the Iraqi gunners kept their heads down in their turrets to avoid snipers. Less than two hours later, Ahmed was back on base. "It's baby steps," said Marine Capt. Carlos Barela, commander of Lima Company. "They're nervous, but that's good. If they weren't, they'd be careless." It was a quiet first trip out, though it might not have been. Insurgents, apparently, had been watching. A Marine in a watchtower spotted a man planting a roadside bomb one street over from where the Iraqi Humvees had been circling.



An Iraqi soldier searches a local man during a combat patrol in Ramadi, Iraq. (AP Photo/Todd Pitman)

Ahmed praised the newly arrived vehicles, but expressed a deep concern for lack of other equipment. Although his men had uniforms, kneepads, and aging Kalashnikov rifles, they have no mortars, sniper rifles or rocket-propelled grenade launchers. Capt. Jabar, an Iraqi commander who directed Ahmed's movements from base, agreed. "The insurgents are better armed than us," Jabar said. "The Humvees will help. And we can still fight them, but we depend on the Americans for everything" - medics, logistics, firepower, air support.

Jabar said his 90-man company had only two sets of night-vision goggles. Another Iraqi commander, who made similar complaints about equipment at an army recruiting drive in Ramadi last week, said his unit had to share armored vests to go on patrols. Barela said American commanders were aware of the complaints - and Iraqi soldiers' concerns over pay - but ultimately, those were issues for the Iraqi Defense Ministry to overcome. "We could solve all their problems for them, but if we do it all, that's going to make them dependent," said Barela, 35, of Albuquerque, N.M. "We're standing up a military from scratch. There's going to be growing pains." A lot more training will be needed before Iraqi forces can stand on their own. In central Ramadi, for example, only Marines are going out on night patrols.

The U.S. command in Baghdad says the Iraqi army numbers about 111,000 troops, and is expected to reach full strength of 130,000 next year. But they are struggling to retain those who've already joined up. Some quit because of the hazards of duty, others because of low pay.

Iraqi troops deployed here get one week of vacation after every three-week stint. "Every month, two, three, five members of each company don't come back," Jabar said. "At this rate, our companies will be reduced to single platoons."